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SUBJECT: BELARUS WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - MARCH 27, 2009

MINSK 00000100 001.2 OF 003

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by  
Embassy Minsk.

#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

##### Civil Society

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- March 25 Protest Passes Without Violence (para. 2)
- Military Court Dismisses Forced Conscription Appeal (para. 3)
- Opposition Youth Leader Fined (para. 4)
- Convicted Opposition Youth Slapped (para. 5)

##### Domestic Economy

-----

- Russian Finance Minister Kudrin on Russia-Belarus Financial Relations (para. 6)
- Russia Ratifies Transit Agreement Between Russia's and Belarus' Customs Offices (para. 7)
- Lukashenka Discusses Economic Cooperation with Abkhazia (para. 8)

##### Foreign Trade

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- Belarus Working to Remove Restrictions Imposed by Trade Partners (para. 9)
- Belarus Seeks to Synchronize WTO Accession with Russia (para. 10)

##### Quote of the Week (para. 11)

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##### Civil Society

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#### ¶2. March 25 Protest Passes Without Violence

About 1,000 persons assembled peacefully at the Academy of Sciences by 6:00 pm local time March 25 to mark the 91st anniversary of Belarus' (initial) declaration of independence. Police presence in the immediate vicinity was very light; only uniformed traffic police. Diplomatic observers included the Lithuanian and Polish Ambassadors, OSCE Head of Office, Swedish, British, French and U.S. chargis, and Czech, Latvian, Estonian and U.S. diplomats. Organizations including Maladaya Belarus (MB), Malady Front (MF), Belarusian Christian Democracy, United Civic Party, For Freedom, Belarusian Popular Front, and the Party of the Forces of the Right were present.

Around 7:00, about 10-15% of the group (MB and MF) left the Academy, heading in the proscribed direction (towards October Square) rather than towards Bangalore Square (the approved

destination). Traffic police did not stop them. A much larger group of police in full riot gear blocked this group's progress in the direction of October Square. The protestors then returned to the Academy of Sciences. No detentions were reported in Minsk. The Interior Ministry immediately released a statement that the demonstrators have violated traffic and mass events regulations and provoked possible clashes with police. The Ministry has also asserted that it will make a legal assessment of demonstrators' actions, which included burning pictures of President Lukashenka.

### 13. Military Court Dismisses Forced Conscription Appeal

A Minsk military court dismissed March 23 an appeal regarding Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) youth group leader Franak Vyachorka's forced conscription and the use of violence against him during "illegal" draft procedures in January 2009. The court refused to open a criminal case in connection with the beating of Vyachorka and his enlistment into the army. Vyachorka's father Vintsuk, Deputy Chairperson of the BPF, called the verdict "predictable".

### 14. Opposition Youth Leader Fined

On March 23, a Minsk district court tried and fined Maladaya Belarus opposition youth group leader Artur Finkevich \$180 on administrative charges of "minor hooliganism". Police detained Finkevich March 20 for allegedly using obscenities.

### 15. Convicted Opposition Youth Slapped

Police issued two warnings March 23 and March 26 to Alyaksandr Barazenska, a European Belarus movement activist sentenced to a year of partial house arrest in December 2008 for participating in unsanctioned January 10, 2008, entrepreneur demonstration, for purportedly violating terms of his sentence and abusing alcohol. On March 23, a police officer also insulted Barazenska

MINSK 00000100 002.2 OF 003

and slapped him in the face. The activist complained to the prosecutors regarding officer's conduct; however, he expressed doubt that the appeal would "yield any results". Barazenska might face criminal charges and up to three years in jail after the third police warning.

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Domestic Economy  
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### 16. Russian Finance Minister Kudrin on Russia-Belarus Financial Relations

According to media reports, Russia's Vice Premier/Finance Minister Aleksey Kudrin reiterated on March 20 that Russia will issue the remaining part of its \$2 billion loan to Belarus shortly. He told the joint session of Russia's and Belarus' Finance Ministries that \$500 million will come to Belarus once Russia amends its 2009 budget. "We will always help and support our neighbors", said Kudrin about Russia's assistance to Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. He noted that Russia will review the recent China-Belarus currency swap agreement and opined that the introduction of a single currency for Russia and Belarus would be inexpedient in the time of crisis.

### 17. Russia Ratifies Transit Agreement Between Russia's and Belarus' Customs Offices

According to press reports, Russia's State Duma ratified the Transit Agreement between the Customs offices of Russia and Belarus March 20. The agreement, signed in June 2007 and ratified by the Belarusian parliament in December 2007, established equal conditions for goods transiting customs territories of both countries and streamlined all related regulations and paperwork.

### 18. Lukashenka Discusses Economic Cooperation with Abkhazia

Presidential press service reported on March 23 that Lukashenka received the so-called "president" of the breakaway republic of Abkhazia Sergey Bagapsh on the same day in Sochi to discuss economic cooperation. Lukashenka expressed readiness to help Abkhazia solve its economic problems. In turn, the Abkhazian leader assured that he is ready to allocate \$30 million this year to purchase Belarusian-made trucks. Although during the meeting Lukashenka referred to Abkhazia as an independent state, the press service report provided no indication of whether the parties discussed recognition of Abkhazia's independence.

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Foreign Trade  
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¶9. Belarus Working to Remove Restrictions Imposed by Trade Partners

Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Yevdochenko told a seminar on foreign trade issues March 24 that the GOB is working hard to remove restrictions and limitations imposed by the governments of the U.S., Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Turkey, India and the EU in trade with Belarus. Such measures have in the first place affected Belarus' chemical, food, metal and light industries. The GOB ascribes \$170 million in export revenues growth in 2008 to its anti-restriction efforts, though it admits the country could have exported at least \$70 million more had these efforts been more effective. Starting January 1, the EU canceled 13 out of 33 limitations on Belarus' textile exports. Ukraine and Moldova have removed a few anti-dumping quotas on Belarusian products. The Deputy Minister also opined that Belarus' inclusion in the EU's Eastern Partnership will expedite the removal of all remaining limitations, except those introduced by the USG against the state-owned petrochemical conglomerate Belneftekhim.

¶10. Belarus Seeks to Synchronize WTO Accession with Russia

Speaking at the same event March 24, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Yevdochenko stressed that synchronizing WTO accession efforts with Russia is of vital importance for Belarus, as both countries routinely touch base on the issue in a special format and "keep our foreign partners posted". He added that even if Russia and Belarus accede to the WTO separately, the timelines should be close because otherwise integration efforts of both countries may be complicated.

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Quote of the Week  
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¶11. Speaking at the news conference in Minsk March 24, Deputy Defense Minister General Aleksandr Boligatov promised that Belarusian soldiers will eat a higher quality food by the end of the year.

MINSK 00000100 003.2 OF 003

"Today's cost of a soldier's daily meal is BYR 6,380 (\$2.28) per day. This amount covers all nutritional needs. The meal includes, among other things, juices and various vegetables. So, servicemen receive sufficient amount of vitamins and minerals". The general also opined that such meals are well-balanced and any other food brought to servicemen by their parents (except for sweets and multivitamins) would be redundant.  
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